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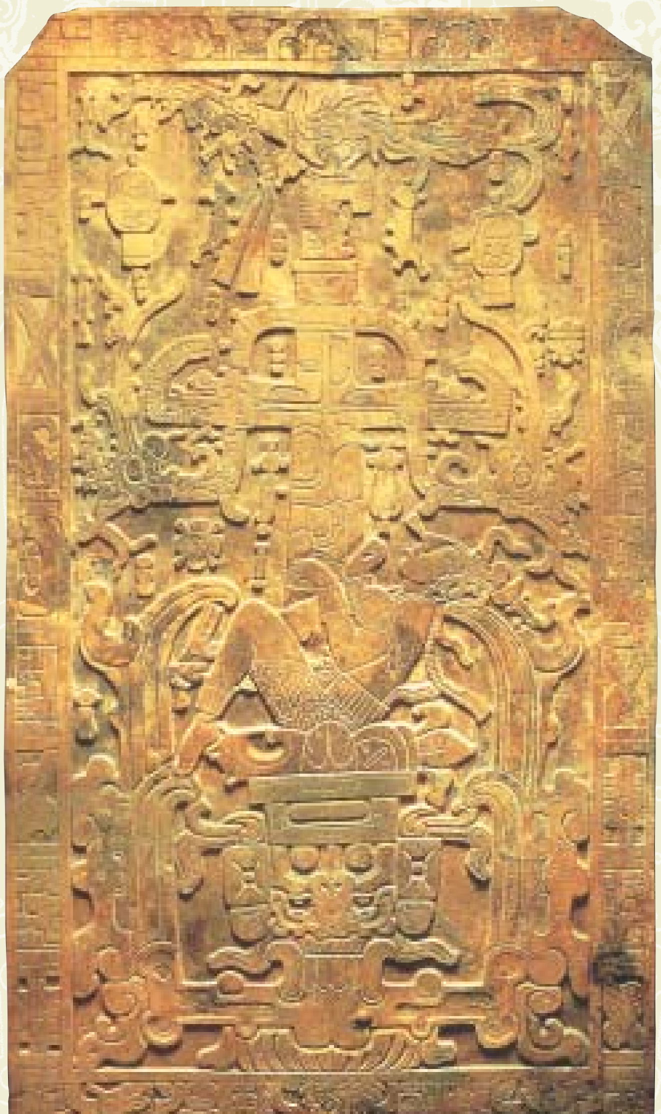
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Abstract Many scholars suggest that Quetzalcoatl of Mesoamerica (also known as the Feathered Serpent), the Maya Maize God, and Jesus Christ could all be the same being. By looking at ancient Mayan writings such as the Popol Vuh, this theory is further explored and developed. These ancient writings include several stories that coincide with the stories of Jesus Christ in the Bible, such as the creation and the resurrection. The role that both Quetzalcoatl and the Maize God played in bringing maize to humankind is comparable to Christ's role in bringing the bread of life to humankind. Furthermore, Quetzalcoatl is said to have descended to the Underworld to perform a sacrifice strikingly similar to the atonement of Jesus Christ. These congruencies and others like them suggest that these three gods are, in fact, three representations of the same being.

QUETZALCOATL, THE MAYA MAIZE GOD, AND JESUS CHRIST



Sarcophagus lid of Pakal, king of Palenque (died A.D. 683), who is resurrecting with the tree of life. © Merle Greene Robertson, 1976.

DIANE E. WIRTH

Legends about Quetzalcoatl from Mexico and Central America bring forward tantalizing resemblances to aspects of the life and New World ministry of Jesus Christ. In the past, some leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints occasionally drew attention to certain of those similarities.[1] Among those mentioned in post–Spanish conquest manuscripts were that Quetzalcoatl was the Creator, that he was born of a virgin, that he was a god of the air and earth (in his manifestation as the Feathered Serpent), that he was white and bearded, that he came from heaven and was associated with the planet Venus, that he raised the dead, and that he promised to return. The full picture, however, is extremely complex.

In light of ancient sources and modern studies that have appeared in recent decades, some proposed links between Jesus Christ and Quetzalcoatl remain quite plausible while others are now questionable. This article examines and sets into a helpful context possible links that may derive from, or be related to, the Nephites' knowledge of and teaching about the Savior.

The Primary Sources

Documentary sources for pre-Columbian beliefs vary in nature and value. The only truly ancient texts are inscriptions in Mayan hieroglyphs, which scholars finally are able to decipher in whole or in part. We may glean some information from these writings pertaining to Maya beliefs about the creation. Current interpretations of the iconography (artistic expressions) found in Mexico are beginning to make valuable contributions to our understanding of Quetzalcoatl and the mythology associated with him, an understanding that did not exist even a few years ago. Useful information about Quetzalcoatl is also found in native records known as codices. These screen-folded pictorial books (see fig. 1) date to both before and after the Spanish conquest of Latin America. The bulk of the Quetzalcoatl legends come from colonial-period translations of the codices into Spanish and transcriptions of the codices in the native tongues.

The later Mexican records, a third set of sources, are the most inconsistent but must be considered in any discussion of Quetzalcoatl. Because Catholic clergy and missionaries wrote most of the post-conquest manuscripts, dating chiefly from the 16th century, any review of that material must exhibit caution, for as H. B. Nicholson advises, "anything that has come down to us through the intermediation of early friars must always be critically examined for possible Christian influence."[2]

There is a very simple reason for such skepticism. Spanish chroniclers, desiring to please adherents of both Christianity and the religion of the indigenous natives, emphasized the powerful symbolic continuity between the Catholic and Mesoamerican belief systems. They did this by frequently combining myth and history from pre-Hispanic times. Such manipulation was even a native tradition in Mesoamerica. Kings caused historical records to be manipulated in order to strengthen and authenticate their legitimacy to rule their people. Because of these practices, scholars are sometimes in a quandary as to what is historical and what is mythological.

Some post-conquest stories clearly rest on Christian embellishment. For example, an account of a language that was no longer understood, akin to the episode of the Tower of Babel, appears in the Popol Vuh of the Quiché Maya, who live in the Guatemalan highlands.[3] A story about parting waters, also mentioned in the Popol Vuh, is comparable to Moses' dividing the sea;[4] and the writers of the *Título de Totonicapán* attest that they came from "the other part of the sea, from Civán-Tulán, bordering on Babylonia."[5] Referring to the latter source, Allen Christenson notes that "most of the scriptural material [of the writings of Totonicapán] was taken directly from a Christian tract, the *Theologia Indorum,* written in 1553 by a Spanish priest named Domingo de Vico."[6] Thus, apparent references in Mesoamerican texts to events known from the Bible cannot always be taken seriously.

On the other hand, although some accounts from ancient America may sound overtly Christian, we should not dismiss them entirely for exhibiting such missionary influence. In fact, these manuscripts sometimes report the same events that are recorded in other documents from Mesoamerica. Because it is highly doubtful that such correspondence is coincidental or that Catholic friars contacted one another as they related nearly identical information from different cultures in separate regions and from various time frames, such accounts may be authentic and thus warrant serious consideration.

In this discussion we will concern ourselves with those aspects of Quetzalcoatl that some LDS authors suggest are related to Christ. This will include accounts about the ruler Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, whose



Fig. 1. Facsimile reproduction of the pre-conquest *Madrid Codex.* Courtesy Museo de América, Madrid, Spain.

history is often confused with that of his god, Quetzalcoatl. The Maize God of the Maya is also important to this analysis because characteristics of this supernatural entity may also relate to the life of the Savior.

Quetzalcoatl and the Maya Maize God

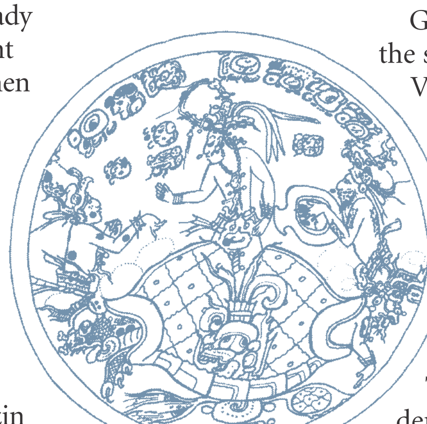
To identify our principal characters, we begin with the Mexican deity Quetzalcoatl, whose name means "Feathered Serpent" (see fig. 2). Farther east the Yucatec Maya name for this god is Kukulcan, which has the same interpretation. Several ancient leaders who worshipped Quetzalcoatl/Kukulcan took upon themselves this appellation, much as Muslims today add *Mohammed* to their names.

The most prolific form of ancient Mesoamerican writing observable today is the Mayan language in hieroglyphic inscriptions. A name tied to Kukulcan was discovered on a Late Classic pot (A.D. 600–800) from Uaxactun, Guatemala, that mentions a date corresponding to 25 December 256 B.C. and applies the name to the current ruler. In fact, it was common Maya practice to associate the current king with another ruler from the past, perhaps even from an earlier mythological time. As already mentioned, this custom was prevalent among the Maya in order to strengthen their ruler's legitimacy to reign. Associating the current king with a highly revered ancestor accomplished this goal. The importance of this inscribed pot found in Guatemala is that it contains a shortened version of the name of the earlier ruler—Kukulcan.[7] Thus the name *Kukulcan* refers to a much earlier king than the Mexican Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, who lived sometime between A.D. 700 and 1000.[8] Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, a Toltec ruler, is the most popular of the culture heroes noted in colonial literature. Apparently, the name *Quetzalcoatl,* or *Kukulcan,* enjoyed a long duration in Mesoamerica, whether it referred to rulers, high priests, or the god himself.



Fig. 2. Aztec sculpture in stone of the Feathered Serpent. Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City.

Fig. 3 (below). A Maya plate depicts the resurrection of Hun Nal Ye (the Maize God), attended by his twin sons Hun Ahua and Yax Balam, as he springs forth from the earth turtle. Drawing by Linda Schele. ©David Schele, courtesy Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.



The Maize God is the other deity with which we are concerned in this study. This mythological, supernatural figure is called by various names among the Maya, depending on the locale, but the most prominent names are Hun Nal Ye and Hun Hunahpu. In terms of a general time frame, the Maize God is referred to in iconography and other texts before the conquest, as well as in the Popol Vuh after Spanish contact. References in the Popol Vuh likely go back to earlier hieroglyphic sources.[9]

Without going into a detailed explanation, we simply note that the Maize God is intrinsically involved with later creation mythologies of central Mexico and the Mixtec people of Oaxaca, where Quetzalcoatl stories abound. While the Popol Vuh does not mention Hun Hunahpu as being one and the same with the Maize God, a codex-style polychrome bowl from the Late Classic period clarifies his identify (see fig. 3). In the scene portrayed on the bowl, Hun Nal Ye, the Maya Maize God, resurrects from a split tortoise shell representing the earth. His sons, the Hero Twins, are depicted at his left and right and are identified as Hun Hunahpu's sons: Hunahpu, written as Hun Ahau, and Xbalanque, written as Yax Balam.[10]

To understand Hun Hunahpu's identification as the Maize God in Guatemala, we need to retell some of the story surrounding him. In the Popol Vuh, Hunahpu and Xbalanque defeat the evil lords of the Underworld who have killed their father, Hun Hunahpu. After avenging their father's death, the Twins are responsible for his subsequent rebirth. Hun Hunahpu is then resurrected from the earth, which is often portrayed as a turtle carapace. Therefore, this vessel, which visually demonstrates the same story told in the Popol Vuh hundreds of years later, clearly establishes Hun Nal Ye and Hun Hunahpu as the same person.

In the Popol Vuh we see readily the Twins' association with maize. Hunahpu and Xbalanque instruct their grandmother that if the corn planted in her house dies, they die; but if it lives, they will remain

alive. According to the story, after they defeat the Lords of Death in the Underworld, the Hero Twins are reborn; that is, the maize remained alive in their grandmother's house. We conclude that both the father, Hun Hunahpu, and his sons, particularly his namesake Hunahpu, are related to maize and may be designated as maize gods. Importantly, David H. Kelley presents additional evidence from the Popol Vuh that Hun Hunahpu and the Maize God are one and the same.[11]

The importance of including the Maize God with his differing appellations in this study is significant. We will see that the Maize God functions as a sacrificial god who dies and resurrects and who also plays an important role in the creation and therefore is reminiscent of the roles of Christ as Savior and Creator.

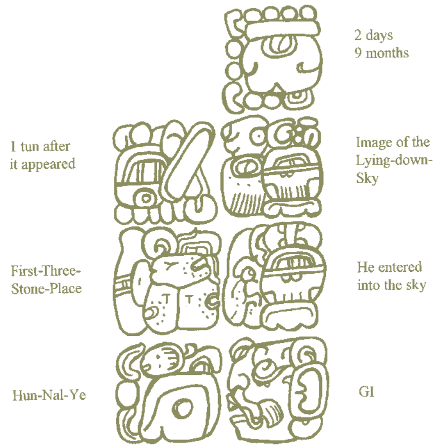
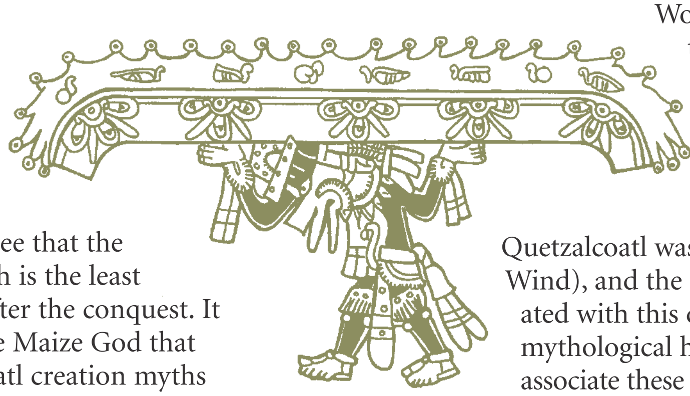


Fig. 4. A creation text from the Tablet of the Cross, Palenque (redrawn after Freidel, Schele, and Parker, *Maya Cosmos,* 1993, p. 70).

Fig. 5 (below). The Mexican god Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl lifts the sky at creation (redrawn after the *Vienna Codex*).



The Creation

The available Mesoamerican sources dealing with the creation follow in chronological order. Pre-Columbian Mayan hieroglyphic texts found in Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico (see fig. 4), and Quirigua, Guatemala, disclose a role for the Maya Maize God in the creation.[12] Polychrome vessels and plates also testify to the Maize God's participation at this pristine time. In addition, pictorial codices drawn before the conquest deal with Quetzalcoatl's role in the creation. Concerning other documents, most scholars agree that the Quiché Maya's Popol Vuh is the least corrupted text written after the conquest. It also repeats stories of the Maize God that coincide with Quetzalcoatl creation myths from Mexico. The Maya accounts corroborate the acts of creation in a somewhat different manner because they were recorded by another culture, but they still present a pan-Mesoamerican mythological paradigm. Finally, we possess legends in 16th-century manuscripts declaring Quetzalcoatl as the Creator. These declarations are discussed in a later section of this paper pertaining to plausible pre-Hispanic beliefs recorded after the conquest.

On the whole, scholars view stories concerned with the god Quetzalcoatl and his involvement in the creation as exhibiting the least amount of Christian influence. Referring to colonial period manuscripts, Michel Graulich found that "careful reconstruction and analysis of the myths dealing with the first phase of the creation of the world . . . all [show] variations on a single theme. Comparative analysis also suggests that the often-suspected Christian influence is minor and points to the unity of Mesoamerican thought" on Quetzalcoatl as Creator.[13]

At Palenque, inscriptions inform us that Hun Nal Ye, the Maize God, raised the sky in one phase of creation from the primordial sea (see fig. 4). This happened when he positioned the World Tree (or Tree of Life) at the center axis of the cosmos.[14] Speaking to this theme, Kent Reilly explained that Mayanists now believe the creation involved bloodletting by First Father, another name for Hun Nal Ye,[15] which blood fertilized sacred space, causing maize to spring forth. The sprouting maize served as an *axis mundi,* or World Tree, lifting the sky off the earth and allowing light to enter creation.[16]

One further connection exists between the Maize God and creation. The god Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl was born on the day 9 Ik (9 Wind), and the Maya Maize God is associated with this day in 3409 B.C., a point in mythological history. Some scholars associate these two deities as near equivalents not only because they were associated with the same day but because they participated in similar creation events.[17] In the pre-Columbian Mixtec *Vienna Codex,* Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl is shown raising up the sky (see fig. 5). A variation of this theme appears in a post-conquest text wherein

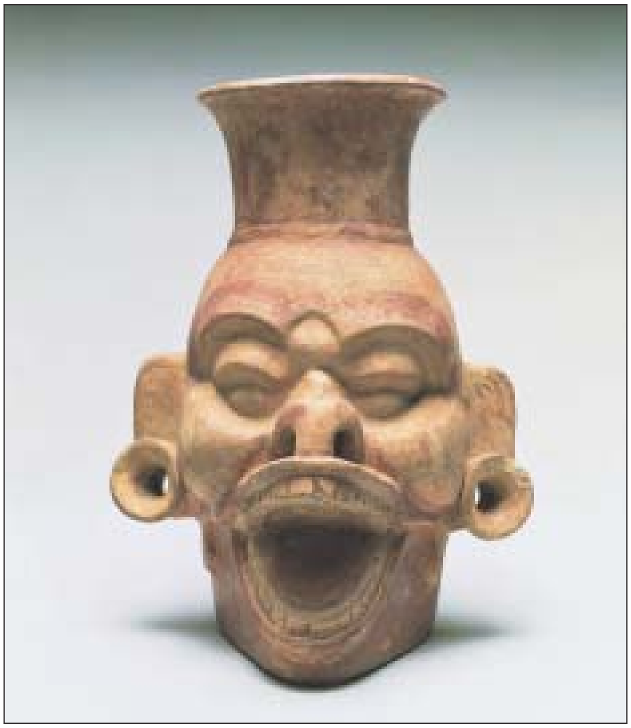


Fig. 6. This pot depicting Ehectal-Quetzalcoatl in his wind-connected aspect came from excavations by the BYU New World Archaeological Foundation at Izapa, Chiapas, Mexico. Photo by Michel Zabé.

Quetzalcoatl is described as metamorphosing into an enormous tree. Then he and another deity push up the sky with their tree forms.[18]

An identifying feature of Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl is a projecting, red avian snout (see fig. 5). Through this beaklike device he blew wind, air, and the breath of life, which was his primary role. This strange-looking anthropomorphic deity can be traced from the time of the conquest back to the pre-Classic era. A terra-cotta pot sculpted with the face of Ehecatl was found at Izapa, Chiapas, Mexico, and dates to the first or second century B.C.[19] (see fig. 6). However, we do not know whether this particular image bears the same creative connotation that Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl possessed 1,700 years later. Because wind precedes rain, Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl is associated with life-giving rains. In other words, the title of Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl designated him as a god of life, even the Creator.

The Bread of Life

Both Quetzalcoatl and the Maya Maize God are responsible for bringing maize to humankind, maize being the most important staple in Mesoamerica. According to legend, Quetzalcoatl transformed himself into an ant in order to retrieve seeds from the Mountain of Sustenance, where maize is kept.[20] Ceramics portray the resurrected Maize God bringing maize to the surface of the earth from the Mountain of Sustenance. These kernels served as food and were believed to be the substance from which humans were created.[21]

Sacrificed for Humankind

A story of how Quetzalcoatl saved humankind appears in the post-conquest *Leyenda de los Soles (Legend of the Suns).* This deity descended to the Underworld to shed his blood onto the bones of the deceased so that they would live again.[22] The entire legend, with all its strange details, sounds pagan to the Christian world, but Latter-day Saints hear echoes of the saving work of Jesus Christ among departed spirits. To summarize, Quetzalcoatl goes to the Underworld to retrieve human bones after a great flood destroyed his world and its people, people who were subsequently transformed into fish but were considered “the ancestors.” An old goddess grinds the bones of these ancestors like maize and places the flourlike meal in a container. Quetzalcoatl performs a bloodletting ritual in which he drips the sacrificial blood onto the ground bones, giving them the potential for life. The present race of humans beings is believed to be descended from those who were reborn from their deceased state. In an illustration in the *Borgia Codex*, Quetzalcoatl appears as the god of breath and air, Ehecatl, and sits back-to-back with the God of Death (see fig. 7). It has been suggested by some LDS scholars that this illustration represents the above story. The skeleton lives because it contains a living heart hanging from its rib cage.

As noted previously, the Maize God, or First Father, gave his blood and thereby caused maize to be reborn from seed. Maize is intrinsically involved with man because the Maya believed man to be made of maize. As with the above story of Quetzalcoatl, fish were also associated with maize. For example, in the Popol Vuh, the Hero Twins’ bones were ground like maize, thrown into a river, turned into fish, and eventually resurrected.[23]

The Tree and Resurrection

A World Tree (Tree of Life) is also significant to this scenario. To the Maya, the World Tree is a motif

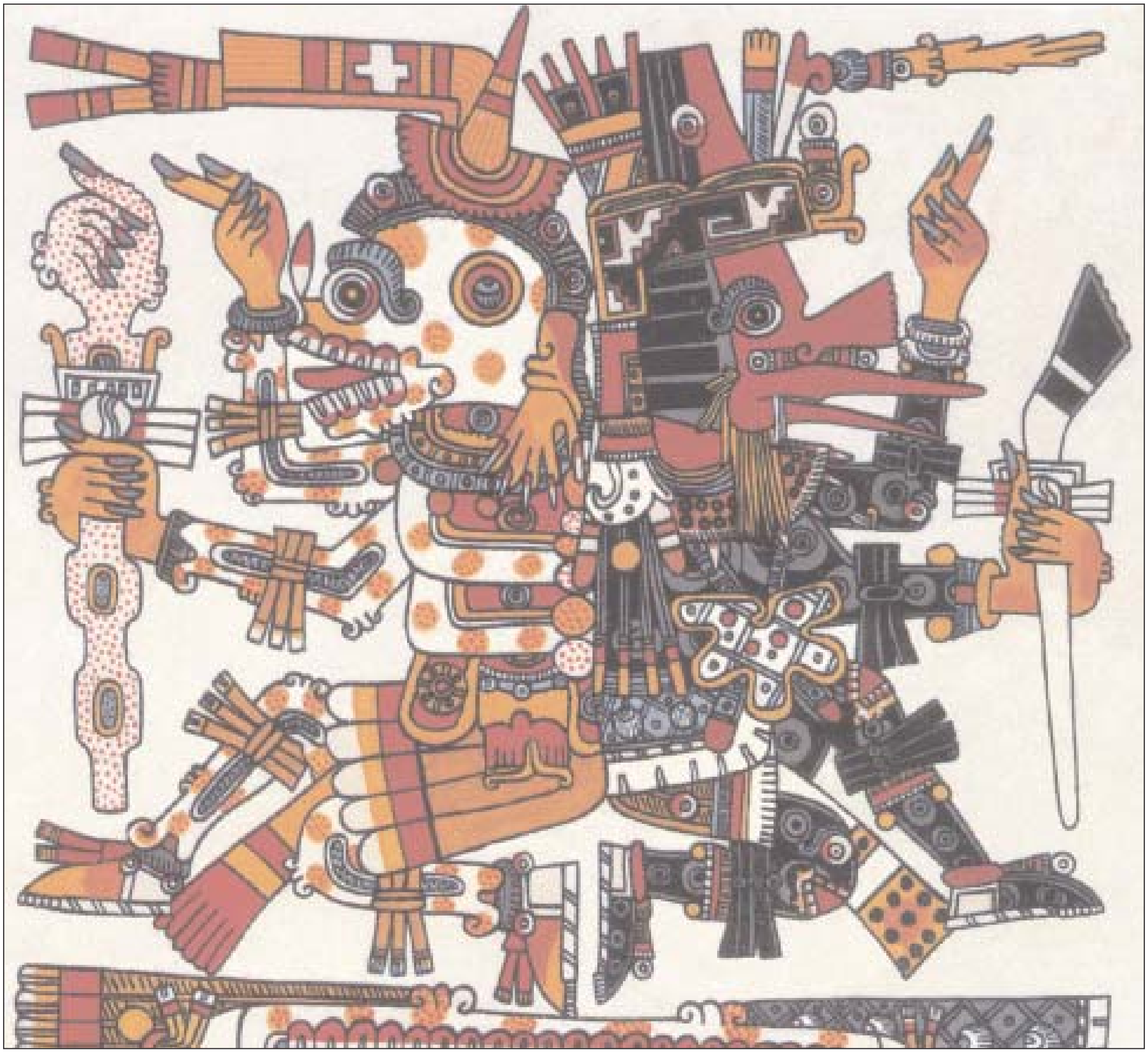


Fig. 7. Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl back-to-back with a living skeleton (redrawn after *Codex Borgia*).

of resurrection and life and has been for over 2,000 years.[24] In Maya myth the Lords of Death hang the decapitated head of Hun Hunahpu on a nonbearing tree, after which it bears fruit.[25] When his sons defeat those denizens of the Underworld, the Maize God Hun Hunahpu is resurrected.

In the human realm, Pakal, the great Maya king of Palenque, is buried in a magnificent sarcophagus deep within the Temple of Inscriptions. The carving on the lid of the sarcophagus depicts Pakal as the young Maize God, with the Tree of Life springing from his body in resurrection (see the photo on p. 4; compare Alma 32:28–41). This is Mesoamerica's most famous and remarkable story in stone, carved approximately 800 years before the Popol Vuh was set in cursive writing after the arrival of the Spanish. Much of this ideology had already existed for many centuries in Mesoamerica.

Deity, Light, and the Sun

A Catholic friar named Juan de Cordova wrote the following account while working among the

Zapotec Indians of Oaxaca, Mexico. Quoting them, he recorded:

> On the date we call Tecpatl a great light came from the northeastern sky. It glowed for four days in the sky, then lowered itself to the rock . . . in the Valle [Valley] in Oaxaca. From the light there came a great, very powerful being, who stood on the very top of the rock and glowed like the sun in the sky. . . . Then he spoke, his voice was like thunder, booming across the valley.[26]

Allen Christenson brought to my attention that the above story may be related to the account in the Popol Vuh of the first dawn, which describes the light as a man. Dennis Tedlock's translation follows:

> The sun was like a person when he revealed himself. His face was hot, so he dried out the face of the earth. Before the sun came up it was soggy, and the face of the earth was muddy before the sun came up. And when the sun had risen just a short distance he was like a person, and his heat was unbearable. Since he revealed himself only when he was born, it is only his reflection that now remains. As they put it in the ancient text, "The visible sun is not the real one."[27]

These citations illustrate that a being of intense light, comparable to the sun, made a deep impression on the natives of the New World. It is no wonder that these ancient people related this personage to the living sun.

Any early association of Quetzalcoatl with the sun is a bit obscure. However, we should consider a story in post-Columbian literature. The god Nanahuatzin, an aspect of Quetzalcoatl, became the sun. This ulcerated, sickly being jumped into a fire pit after a ritual fast, resulting in his emergence as Tonatiuh, the sun god of the Aztecs[28] (see fig. 8). Here we see aspects of death and life, dark and light woven together. Importantly, Nanahuatzin combines the facets of immortality and light in himself. We should also consider that he sacrificed himself for the well-being of humankind.

The Maize God, as well as Quetzalcoatl's counterpart, Nanahuatzin, are solar gods. To further substantiate this connection between the Mexican god Quetzalcoatl and the Maya Maize God, we may look to a story in the Popol Vuh wherein the Hero Twins, sons of the Maize God, go to the Underworld to play a ball game with the Lords of Death. These demons of the Underworld trick and decapitate one of them, Hunahpu. Later in the story, like Nanahuatzin, the Twins jump into a fire pit, an act that leads eventually to Hunahpu's resurrection as the sun. Regarding the conclusion of this story, Raphaël Girard explained:

> Hunahpu rises triumphant and ascends to the heavens, symbolizing at one and the same time the appearance of dawn and the shoot of maize breaking through from the Underworld onto the earth's surface, where it is crowned by a crest of green leaves, identified with the magnificent feather headdress of the young Solar deity.[29]

The ball of the ball game was considered Hunahpu's head, as well as the life-giving sun. In art, the ball sometimes is portrayed with a skull inside it, denoting this tradition. Played throughout Mesoamerica, this ball game exhibited rich cosmic and mythological significance.[30]



Fig. 8. Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl as god of the wind and air with symbol of the sun on his back (redrawn after the *Codex Borgia*).

Association with Christ: The Questionable and the Plausible

The Spanish texts were written 1,500 years after Christ visited the people of the Book of Mormon. By A.D. 200 the growth of the seeds of apostasy were well under way (see 4 Nephi 1:24–26), indicating an interim of 1,300 years between the distortion of the gospel and the writing of the post-conquest Spanish

texts. Consequently, in approaching possible links between Christ and Quetzalcoatl, scholars need to be careful in determining which sections of the post-conquest manuscripts contain pre-Hispanic traditions. In contrast, pre-conquest traditions are more well defined and therefore preserve people's beliefs more accurately. We will examine specific problems and perhaps find some solutions to questions about possible connections between the Savior, Quetzalcoatl, and the Maya Maize God.

Questionable Associations

Colonial sources referring to the deified ruler Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl often cause confusion about the god Quetzalcoatl and Jesus Christ. Characteristics of this ruler are that he was born of a virgin, that he promised to return, that he had an association with the planet Venus (the Morning and Evening Star), and that his emblem was the Feathered Serpent (presumably connected to the nonfeathered, brazen serpent raised by Moses to heal the Israelites).

We notice that there is certainly more than one human named Quetzalcoatl, and maybe even more than one Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, and that later chroniclers amalgamated them into one historical person. This perception arises from the varied dates assigned to Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl's life in the post-conquest manuscripts. The repetition of histories by Mesoamerican natives, a practice tied to their concept of time as cyclical rather than linear, does not make for an easy study of this ruler. Unraveling these tales simply cannot be done with accuracy. Even so, we attempt to tell the story of this revered legendary hero, Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl.

To some extent, the records fuse Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl's life and deeds with those of his god, Quetzalcoatl. Nicholson comments on this fusion that "a certain degree of 'mythification' of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl almost certainly occurred, . . . as well as some assimilation to the deity whose particular protagonist he was credited with being."[31] Therefore, it is extremely important for researchers to look at the surrounding content and context of these various colonial manuscripts when determining which portion of the account is referring to the deity Quetzalcoatl and which is giving a historical narrative of the famed culture hero Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl.

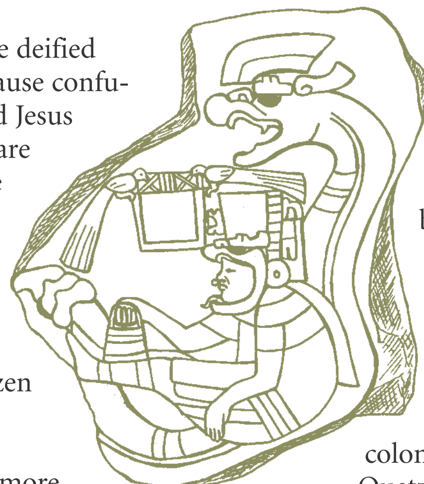


Fig. 9. An Olmec feathered serpent cradles a male priest (drawn after Monument 19, La Venta, Tabasco, Mexico).

We will begin with the "virgin birth" myth. There is no account in the pre- or post-conquest texts that says Quetzalcoatl or the Maize God experienced a miraculous virgin birth. However, Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl's illustrious life began with his "virgin birth," which story is garnished with a biblical overlay throughout but obviously mixed with historical places and events. A strong supernaturalistic flavor pervades the whole account, especially regarding this culture hero's mother, Chimalman, who received an annunciation from a heavenly messenger sent down by the creator god.[32] Because both the Book of Mormon and the New Testament testify that Jesus Christ was born of a virgin, it is tempting for a Latter-day Saint to see ties between this trait and that found in the story of these 16th-century manuscripts. But we must be cautious.

We come to the second point, that of the return. Nowhere in these colonial-period texts do we find the god Quetzalcoatl declaring that he would someday return. However, the historical narrative of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl's life states that *he* said that *he* would return to his people.[33]

Since confusion has developed among scholars over the "returning myth," I suggest that we look to one of two possible answers: (1) this ruler actually said he would return, or (2) his people's oral traditions held that their god Quetzalcoatl said that he would return and incorporated this part of the tradition into their mortal leader's history. Clearly, there is no definitive answer as to what actually occurred, and researchers can only make guesses in their conclusions. It is certain, of course, that this myth is pre-Hispanic. However, it is telling that King Motecuhzoma believed that Cortés was the returning Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, who emulated the personification of his god Quetzalcoatl.[34]

The worship of Quetzalcoatl underwent a resurgence with the birth of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl. As a result, a clear-cut distinction cannot be drawn between the ruler and the god, as noted above. The Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl saga includes stories of drunkenness, fornication, and murder.[35] Nevertheless,

this ruler was regarded as a deity by his followers, as was true of some kings in Mesoamerica. Therefore, we face a smoky screen of mythological, historical, and Christian influence throughout these legends that tie mortal Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl to the god Quetzalcoatl.

The third element has to do with the planet Venus. Toward the end of Mesoamerican history, Quetzalcoatl is shown in pre-Columbian pictorial codices as associated with this planet. Quetzalcoatl himself is not linked to Venus in any written text, yet the history of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, as recorded in colonial literature, shows this ruler's association with Venus. David Carrasco has noted that "a Topiltzin-Morning Star cult was celebrated in Cholula, suggesting that a fusion of the culture hero and deity Ehécatl [an aspect of Quetzalcoatl] and Morning Star developed."[36] These legends state that upon Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl's death and cremation, he rose to heaven and became the Morning Star.[37] This is how this culture hero became resurrected, deified, and connected to Venus.

Fourth, a more prominent symbol of Quetzalcoatl is the Feathered Serpent. As we shall see, this figure also ties into the Venus ideology. The Feathered Serpent may exist in artistic motifs as early as the Olmec civilization, whose culture some Latter-day Saints equate with the Jaredites. A rock sculpture, Monument 19 from La Venta, Tabasco (circa 900–400 B.C.), portrays a rattlesnake with an avian beak and feather crest (see fig. 9). Two quetzal birds are also carved on this Olmec monument from the Middle Formative period. Taking into consideration that the Jaredites never knew the story of the brazen serpent that Moses lifted up on a pole about 1250 B.C.,[38] we need to question the assumption that the Olmec version of the Feathered Serpent has something to do with Christ. The snakes that attacked the Israelites are referred to as "fiery serpents." There is no mention that Moses' brass serpent represented a flying serpent or a serpent with feathers. Would the Olmec people have equated this avian-reptile with the Messiah, as some propose? There is no solid empirical evidence that the Feathered Serpent represented Christ before he visited the New World.

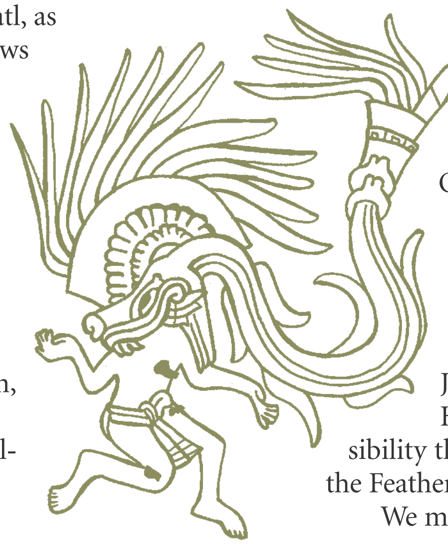


Fig. 10. Feathered serpent, with sacrificial knife in tail, devours a sacrificial victim (redrawn after the *Codex Telleriano-Remensis,* Folio 18r, Trenca 14, Quetzalcoatl).

In this connection, it was the Nephites who brought this story from the Old World.[39] Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that Monument 19 was carved late in the La Venta sequence, circa 400 B.C. If by chance any remaining Jaredites heard this famous Hebrew incident from Mosaic traditions brought by Lehi's family or the Mulekites, the Olmecs/Jaredites could have portrayed the serpent raised on a pole. But this is not the case. According to the Book of Mormon, it was not until 22 B.C. that Nephite teachers made the connection that Moses lifted up the brazen serpent as a type of Christ.[40] Of course, the Nephites may have made the connection earlier, but we do not possess an earlier reference at the present time. Therefore, we cannot be sure that the Feathered Serpent had anything to do with Jesus Christ during Jaredite times. However, we cannot rule out the possibility that Nephites adopted the symbol of the Feathered Serpent after the coming of Christ. We may rationalize that the quetzal bird represents heaven and the serpent represents earth. Christ is both a god (from heaven) and a mortal man (from earth). We do not know all the names that the peoples of the Book of Mormon gave to Christ, even though he may have been called Quetzalcoatl, the "Feathered Serpent," at a later date.

In a related vein, iconographers now know that the artistic expression of the god Quetzalcoatl is strongly linked to militarism. If this deity originally referred to Christ, its nature quickly changed, for around A.D. 200 the symbolism of the Feathered Serpent came to denote power, sacrifice, and war. Archaeological findings within the Pyramid of Quetzalcoatl (Temple of the Feathered Serpent) at Teotihuacán depict this scenario all too clearly. Starting with excavations in the 1980s, approximately 200 human victims of dedicatory sacrifices have been found under the Temple of the Feathered Serpent.[41] In later years many of the plumed-serpent motifs were combined with images of soldiers and implements of war. Feathered-serpent columns at both Tula Hidalgo and Chichen Itza display sacrificial

altars in front of them. At the latter site, panels depict feathered serpents with warriors coming out of their mouths.[42]

A very graphic illustration of Quetzalcoatl in his animal guise as the Feathered Serpent appears in the *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*. Here he devours a male victim whose body has wounds (see fig. 10). The Feathered Serpent's tail includes a sacrificial knife. To the Aztecs, death through ritual sacrifice was necessary for a continued existence or rebirth of all things.[43] This would include the era when the Feathered Serpent and images of Venus were vehicles propagating the cult of Quetzalcoatl through military conquest and the founding of new dynasties[44] (see fig. 11).

Post-conquest literature records nothing about Venus that is benevolent or what we would expect if Christ was related in any way to this aspect of Quetzalcoatl.[45] The iconography of the Feathered Serpent and Venus appears at an early date at Teotihuacán with a clear message of warfare and sacrifice. A bowl from this site portrays the Feathered Serpent with several stars. Beneath the serpent's body are four blood-dripping hearts.[46] This is another example of the association of the Feathered Serpent, Venus, and sacrifice (in this case, the sacrifice of prisoners of war).

An explanation of the Feathered Serpent as a representative of Venus is in order. This fabled serpent is a combination of a god of warfare and blood sacrifice as well as water and fertility. Carlson observed, "The Venus cult was concerned with the symbolic transformation of blood into water and fertility through the ritual execution of captives."[47] This is a running theme found throughout ancient Mesoamerica, for worshippers truly believed that through death (and sacrifice) comes life. In a roundabout way, this may form a parallel to Christ's atoning blood, which is for the benefit of all humankind. However, apostasy destroyed any true meaning of sacrifice among these ancient people.

The Venus sign of Quetzalcoatl or Kukulcan pictured over a shell is a direct reference to war.[48] In fact, epigraphers dub this hieroglyph "Star Wars." The doctrinal shift that led to the sacrifice of war captives and others no doubt started at the beginning of the apostasy that swept through Mesoamerica about A.D. 200 (compare Moroni 9:7–8), eventually causing the spiritual downfall of those Nephites and Lamanites who denied Christ after his visit to their ancestors. In fact, Esther Pasztory has contemplated the idea that the Ciudadela, the compound where the Temple of the Feathered Serpent was constructed about A.D. 150–200, seems to be the architectural representation of a major change in the social and political structure of Teotihuacán, particularly in its militaristic orientation and perhaps in a new dynastic lineage.[49] This striking innovation would certainly coincide with the apostasy as recorded in the Book of Mormon.

There is another issue that needs clarifying with regard to the role of the Feathered Serpent. We have already noted that at about A.D. 200 the people of Teotihuacán associated the Feathered Serpent with Venus. But Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl, the creation god who raises the sky, had nothing to do with these two symbols at that early time. Raúl Velázquez remarks that "there are no identifying ties that connect them to one another. Nevertheless, as of the beginning of the postclassical period (A.D. 900–1000), these three beings begin to mesh until they are melded in the multifaceted character Ce Acatl Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl."[50] Hence, there seem to be accurate traditions about the god Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl until Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl incorporated this god's attributes into his personality, attributes that are mentioned in the post-conquest manuscripts.

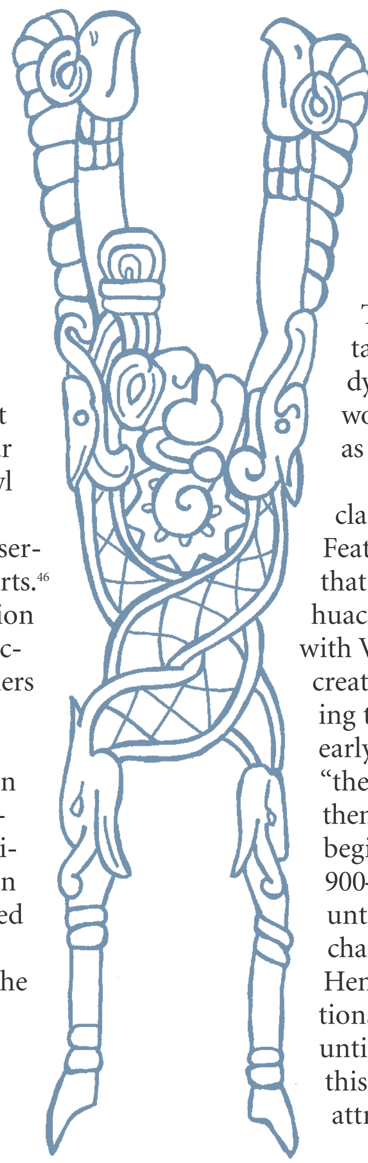


Fig. 11. A Late Classic *palma* (part of a Mesoamerican ballplayer's outfit) featuring Quetzalcoatl, carved in stone (and thus not worn), from Veracruz, Mexico. Quetzalcoatl's identifying features include a wind jewel (conch shell), quetzal bird arms, and serpents for a torso (redrawn with permission after Miller and Taube, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya,* 1993).

Plausible Associations

Many of the symbols associated with Christ also belong to Quetzalcoatl and

the Maize God, symbols that may appear both in pre-Columbian art motifs and in some later colonial literatures that do not seem to be Christian interpolations. Thus it is quite possible that features of the god Quetzalcoatl may be derived, in part, from Mesoamericans' remembrance of Christ's visit to the Americas. Those parts that fit the native traditions are these: a deity playing a role in the creation, "raising the sky";[51] a deity associated with the bread of life[52] (a correspondence to maize); a deity assisting the dead;[53] a deity shedding blood to save mankind;[54] a deity dying on a tree[55] (the Maize God's head hung in a tree); a deity resurrecting and being responsible for the rebirth of the deceased;[56] and a personage of light[57] who is associated with the sun.[58]

We have already reviewed some of these attributes, and others are self-explanatory. There are further interesting aspects to explore. For example, other Christians equate some of the elements of the Maize God with Jesus Christ. In fact, the Maya of today find a strong association between their old god, the Maize God, and their new Christian god. A Catholic priest, Father Rother, wanted an ancient Maya symbol to represent God's aspect as the "bread of life" on the pulpit of a church in Santiago Atitlán, in Guatemala. Perhaps significantly, he chose the image of the Maya Maize God in lieu of an image of the Savior.[59]

Bracketing mythological elements in the colonial manuscript *Leyenda de los Soles,* one glimpses a possible original understanding of Christ's sacrifice,[60] his descent to the spirit world,[61] and his promise to resurrect all people.[62] Although this account apparently refers to those who died before the flood,[63] this aspect may have been introduced after natives lost their understanding of the gospel.

The writing of Juan de Cordova regarding the light that emanated from a powerful man, and the account in the Popol Vuh of the sun's being like a person may stem from Christ's visit to the Americas. These two stories do not appear to be Christian manipulations and are in keeping with Christ's visit to Book of Mormon peoples. Although 3 Nephi 11:10–11 does not specifically say that the Lord descended from the clouds as a personage with light emanating from his being, it is plausible that he did. After all, he wore "a white robe" and, on the second day of his visit, radiated a brilliant light to his 12 disciples (see 3 Nephi 11:8; 19:25, 30).

There may also be an answer to the feathered-serpent motif that is so prevalent in Mesoamerica. If the Feathered Serpent was once considered benevolent and not malevolent, this would explain the apostate situation from an LDS point of view. The Feathered Serpent's association with war and sacrifice would then be a secondary manifestation. And this may well be the case. In addition, it is known that when warriors conquered their enemy in pre-Hispanic times, they sometimes adopted the god of the vanquished people.[64] Is it possible this is what happened to the feathered-serpent symbol? We cannot be certain, but it stands as a possibility.

One more source pertaining to the Feathered Serpent is found in the Popol Vuh, wherein the Feathered Serpent is one of the creator gods in the view of the Quiché Maya. This supernatural deity is known as Gucumatz (Quetzal Bird Serpent) and is in no way related to war and sacrifice, only to creation. The Popol Vuh mentions this supernatural personality briefly, although his role is crucial in the creation. His creative actions, however, are not performed alone—he is one of several gods who are involved in the emergence of the earth from the primordial waters, sowing seeds of plants, and populating the earth with people.[65] This matches the ancient teaching that the Savior participated with the Father and others in the creative process (see Moses 2:1, 26; Abraham 4:1).

Despite discrepancies among Quetzalcoatl myths in colonial sources and the fairly good mythology and symbolism in pre-Columbian inscriptions and iconography, we are left with several crucial points about Quetzalcoatl and the Maya Maize God that apply to Christ's premortal state, his mission on earth, and his role in the hereafter. Are there plausible links? Yes. Are there significant differences? Again, yes. This review should help us to see a complex picture of continuities and discontinuities between Quetzalcoatl and the Savior. Because parts of the picture are rather faint, there is a need for caution in our studies when we approach the intriguing and mysterious figures of Quetzalcoatl and the Maya Maize God and attempt to draw connections between them and the resurrected Jesus.

ENDNOTES

Quetzalcoatl, the Maya Maize God, and Jesus Christ
Diane E. Wirth

1. See John Taylor, *Mediation and Atonement* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1882), 201–3, for a view that Jesus Christ and Quetzalcoatl are the same individual. B. H. Roberts came to a similar conclusion in his *New Witnesses for God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909–11), 3:37–38, 42–46. See also the booklet by Mark E. Peterson, *Christ in America* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1972).
2. H. B. Nicholson, *Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl: The Once and Future Lord of the Toltecs* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2001), 17.
3. See Dennis Tedlock, *Popol Vuh: The Definitive Edition of the Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), 171, which reads: "And the languages of the tribes changed there; their languages became differentiated. They could no longer understand one another clearly when they came away from Tulan."
4. See ibid., 177, where it states, "It isn't clear how they crossed over the sea. They crossed over as if there were no sea. They just crossed over on some stones, stones piled up in the sand. . . . Where the waters divided, they crossed over."
5. Adrián Recinos and Delia Goetz, trans., *The Annals of the Cakchiquels–Title of the Lords of Totonicapán* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953), 194. The original was reputedly written by Diego Reynoso, a noble Quiché (see Nicholson, *Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl,* 178).
6. Allen J. Christenson, trans. and ed., *Popol Vuh: The Mythic Sections—Tales of First Beginnings from the Ancient K'iche'-Maya* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000), 34.
7. Stephen D. Houston, "An Example of Homophony in Maya Script," in *American Antiquity* 49/4 (1984): 800. See also Linda Schele and Peter Mathews, *The Code of Kings: The Language of Seven Sacred Maya Temples and Tombs* (New York: Scribner, 1998), 372 n. 61.
8. For a discussion of the time frame in which Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl lived according to the various post-conquest documents, see Nicholson, *Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl,* 271–79.
9. See Tedlock, Popol Vuh, 1985, 28–32.
10. See Justin Kerr, "The Myth of the Popol Vuh as an Instrument of Power," in *New Theories on the Ancient Maya,* ed. Elin C. Danien and Robert J. Sharer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1992), 116, 120. See also Mary Miller and Karl Taube, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 69, for a clear illustration of the bowl.
11. See David H. Kelley, "Astronomical Identities of Mesoamerican Gods," *Archaeoastronomy* (supplement to *Journal for the History of Astronomy*) 11/2 (1980): S1–S54.
12. See David Freidel, Linda Schele, and Joy Parker, *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path* (New York: Morrow, 1993).
13. Michel Graulich, "Myths of Paradise Lost in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico," *Current Anthropology* 24/5 (1983): 575.
14. See Freidel, Schele, and Parker, *Maya Cosmos,* 71–74. If Reilly is right, this tradition may possibly go back to the Olmec (see ibid., 132).
15. Modern Mayanists sometimes refer to the Maize God as First Father because of the role he played in the creation. However, no text gives his name as a literal translation of "First Father."
16. Kent Reilly, "Visions to Another World by Kent Reilly," lecture at the H. M. de Young Museum, San Francisco, 8 July 1993.
17. See Raphaël Girard, *Le Popol-Vuh: Histoire Culturelle des Maya-Quichés* (Paris: Payot, 1972), 201.
18. See John Bierhorst, *The Mythology of Mexico and Central America* (New York: Morrow, 1990), 147.
19. See John E. Clark, "A New Artistic Rendering of Izapa Stela 5: A Step toward Improved Interpretation," *JBMS* 8/1 (1999): 26.
20. See Karl Taube, *Aztec and Maya Myths* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 39.
21. See ibid., 67.
22. See John Bierhorst, *History and Mythology of the Aztecs: The Codex Chimalpopoca* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992), 145–46. The myth is translated from the Nahuatl language.
23. See Christenson, *Popol Vuh,* 118; and Dennis Tedlock, *Popol Vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life,* rev. ed. (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 280 n. 132.
24. See Elizabeth A. Newsome, *Trees of Paradise and Pillars of the World* (Austin: University of Texas, 2001), 192.
25. See Christenson, *Popol Vuh,* 70, 71, 80.
26. For a translation, see Tony Shearer, *Beneath the Moon and under the Sun* (Albuquerque: Sun, 1975), 72. In 1578 Cordova wrote *Arte en Lengua Zapoteca* in Mexico. In addition to the linguistic part, this book contains a short but valuable note on the rites and beliefs of the Zapotec Indians of Oaxaca.
27. Tedlock, *Popol Vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life,* 161.
28. See Taube, *Aztec and Maya Myths,* 42.
29. Raphaël Girard, *Esotericism of the Popol Vuh: The Sacred History of the Quiche-Maya* (Pasadena, Calif.: Theosophical University Press, 1979), 226.
30. See E. Michael Whittington, ed., *The Sport of Life and Death: The Mesoamerican Ballgame* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2001).
31. H. B. Nicholson, "Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl vs. Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl of Tollan: A Problem in Mesoamerican History and Religion," *Actes du XLIIe Congres International des Americanists, Congres du Centenaire,* vol. 6 (Paris, 2–9 September 1976), 43.
32. See Nicholson, *Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl,* 71–72. See also Nicholson's summary on the following post-conquest manuscripts: *The Anales de Cuauhtitlan,* 41, 45; the bibliographical section on the *Histoyre du Mechique,* the "lost Olmos," 60; and a commentary on the codices *Telleriano-Remensis* and *Vaticanus A,* 63.
33. *The Memorial Breve,* a post-conquest document, informs the reader that when the Toltec King (Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl) left Tollan, he promised to return and reestablish his kingdom. The later Aztecs of Tenochtitlan were aware of this prophecy. See David Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire: Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 194, 197. Other "returning" myths in post-conquest documents are discussed in Nicholson, *Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl,* 37; the bibliographical section of the *Histoyre du Mechique,* the "lost Olmos," 56, 59; the codices *Telleriano-Remensis* and *Vaticanus A,* 71; the writings of Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochital, 115; and the Chimalpahin, 131.
34. H. B. Nicholson, *The "Return of Quetzalcoatl": Did It Play a Role in the Conquest of Mexico?* (Lancaster, Calif.: Labyrinthos, 2002), 8.
35. Nicholson, *Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl,* summarizes these stories in the post-conquest accounts as follows: from Sahagún's *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España,* 26, 37; from the *Anales de Cuauhtitlan,* 47; and from a discussion based on the bibliographical section of the *Histoyre du Mechique,* the "lost Olmos," 47.
36. Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire,* 31.
37. For a discussion on Venus in post-conquest manuscripts with reference to Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, see the following pages in Nicholson, *Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl:* 44 (regarding *The Anales de Cuauhtitlan*), 51–52 (regarding the writings of Motolinía), 59 (regarding the bibliographical section on the *Histoyre du Mechique* [the "lost Olmos"]), and 65, 71 (regarding the codices *Telleriano-Remensis* and *Vaticanus A*).
38. See Numbers 21:6–9.
39. See 1 Nephi 17:41; 2 Nephi 25:20.
40. See Helaman 8:14–15.
41. See George Stuart, "The Timeless Vision of Teotihuacan," *National Geographic* 188/6 (1995), 14.
42. There is a Mexican war serpent called Xiuhtecuhtli, who is associated with warriors and fire, but he appears late in Mesoamerican history. Xiuhtecuhtli is distinguished by his upturned snout and fire tail. See Miller and Taube, *Gods and Symbols,* 189.
43. See Eloise Quiñones Keber, *Codex Telleriano-Remensis: Ritual, Divination, and History in a Pictorial Aztec Manuscript* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 181.
44. See William M. Ringle, Tomás Gallareta Negrón, and George J. Bey III, "The Return of Quetzalcoatl: Evidence for the Spread of a World Religion during the Epiclassic Period," *Ancient Mesoamerica* 9/2 (1998): 214, 218.
45. Revelation 22:16 refers to Christ as the "bright and morning star." We do not know if the Nephites were under the impression that Christ referred to himself as this heavenly body.
46. John B. Carlson, "Venus-Regulated Warfare and Ritual Sacrifice in Mesoamerica: Teotihuacan and the Cacaxtla 'Star Wars' Connection" (College Park, Md.: Center for Archaeoastronomy, 1991), 30.
47. See John B. Carlson, "Rise and Fall of the City of the Gods," *Archaeology* 46/6 (1993), 61.
48. See Ringle et al., "The Return of Quetzalcoatl," 226.
49. See Esther Pasztory, *Teotihuacan: An Experiment in Living* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 115.
50. Raúl Velázquez, *The Myth of Quetzalcoatl* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 32.
51. See Genesis 1:6 and Moses 2:6–7 on raising the firmament to divide the waters. For the Book of Moses as a constituent part of the plates of brass, see Noel B. Reynolds, "The Brass Plates Version of Genesis," in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley,* ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 2:136–173.
52. "For the bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world" (John 6:33); see 3 Nephi 18:1–7; 20:1–9.
53. See Ephesians 4:9; 1 Peter 3:19; 2 Nephi 9:3–14; compare 3 Nephi 25:5–6; Moses 7:56–57.
54. See Hebrews 9:12, 14; Mosiah 3:7; 3 Nephi 18:8–11; Moses 6:59; 7:45–47.
55. See Acts 5:30; 1 Nephi 11:33; 2 Nephi 25:13; Moses 7:55.
56. See 1 Corinthians 15:22; 2 Nephi 9:4–13; Moses 7:56–57.
57. See Joseph Smith—History 1:16–17; 3 Nephi 11:8; 19:25, 30.
58. See Psalm 84:11; Malachi 4:2; 3 Nephi 25:2.
59. See Allen J. Christenson, *Art and Society in a Highland Maya Community: The Altarpiece of Santiago Atitlán* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 26, 114.
60. See for example Luke 22:44; Moses 5:6–11; 2 Nephi 9:4–13.
61. See 1 Peter 3:19–20; 2 Nephi 9:3–14; compare Moses 7:56–57; 3 Nephi 25:5–6.
62. See 1 Corinthians 15:22; 2 Nephi 9:6–13; Helaman 14:25.
63. Compare Moses 7:38, 57.
64. See Linda Schele and Nicolai Grube, *The Proceedings of the Maya Hieroglyphic Workshop: Late Classic and Terminal Classic Warfare,* transcribed and edited by Phil Wanyerka (Austin: University of Texas at Austin, 1995), 31. See also Christina M. Elson and Michael E. Smith, "Archaeological Deposits from the Aztec New Fire Ceremony," *Ancient Mesoamerica* 12/2 (2001): 171.
65. See Tedlock, *Popol Vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life,* 30–31, 64–66, 69, 146.

Painting Out the Messiah: The Theologies of Dissidents
John L. Clark

1. The Book of Mormon does not use a conventional definition for *Messiah.* In traditional biblical writings, *Messiah* is a transliteration of the Hebrew *mashiah,* meaning "anointed" or, when referring to a person, "the anointed one." The Book of Mormon does not relate the term *Messiah* to *anoint* or any of its derivatives. Joseph Smith used the word *Messiah* when he translated the glyph on the plates that represented the concept that Nephi and other prophets had in mind when they referred to the Son of God. *Messiah* is used in the Book of Mormon as a synonym for words or phrases such as "Savior of the world" (1 Nephi 10:4); "Redeemer of the world" (1 Nephi 10:5); "Lord" (1 Nephi 10:7); "Lamb of God" (1 Nephi 10:10); "Lord and . . . Redeemer" (1 Nephi 10:14); "Son of God" (1 Nephi 10:17); "Holy One of Israel," "Redeemer," "God" (2 Nephi 1:10); "Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (2 Nephi 25:19); and "God of our fathers"